SHORT STORY

HOPSCOTCH

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Or: So Long, Playground Day

As they had learned for the umpteenth time from the instructional film with the bouncing ball and the singing frog, the children were all crouched under their desks as their teacher, valiantly risking atomic disintegration on the cafeteria's Mashed Potatoes Day, paced back and forth through the classroom.

One junior philosopher suggested in a whisper that, if this was to be the day the whistling descended from the sky and Missus Kotch were blown to dry shampooed smithereens, they ought to honor her in what was left of the cafeteria by pouring out a carton of milk. He had seen it at the pictures, where a bereaved cowpuncher decanted his canteen after his uncle, who ran a contentious boomtown gazette, was hanged from a dead tree by the irate townsfolk.

"It wouldn't have to be chocolate milk, neither, kid."

Another pointed out that, in the event that they should all be mere moments away from the great delineation between pre-Big Boom and post-Big Boom, they had better start practicing something called 'rationing.'

"It was a word the man knowed on the TV, the one with the tie and the big round cheaters."

The battle between sanctifying sentiment and professed utilitarianism raged on.

In another sector, Poindexter edified his own pupils.

"Mister Snodgrass, says after the bomb drops, the surface of the Earth will be unrecognizable and barren like the Moon and awash in blood and soon the living will come to envy the dead."

"Jeepers," replied one from the audience.

One cluster had taken up the gas mask, issued by the school as an added contingency, wondering if it would make an adequate substitute for a handkerchief in a game of blind man's bluff.

Elsewhere still, a group sat manipulating the paper claws of a cootie-catcher, counting as they did so.

“One… two… three… four…”

Jimbo sat under his desk, peering at his hands. Once, he had inadvertently jabbed himself with a pencil and left a grey mark by the thumb and index finger. He wondered if anything remained of it and if he were somewhere one-part graphite, atomically.

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Outside, metal bars and tubes sprouted from the square lot that held them, the synthetic boughs contorting into a dense thicket of jungle gyms and monkey bars. Macheting their way through the iron underbrush of the playground, the wayfarers combed through the copse, game hunters on the prowl for their query of sport and play, which rarely proved elusive. Closest to the noonday sun, whose light bounced cleanly off the apparatus like a ball or ricocheting bullet, was a great altitudinous turret, from which descended a slide molded into a coil.

A game of hide-and-seek was underway, with one player arguing to another that, should the enemy round the corner of the artificial boulder they both had stowed away behind, the two of them would surely be caught, with this blunder nothing less than a clearcut case of strategic suicide.

“We should just climb up and jump off the great altitudinous turret right now, kid.”

The other was quick to riposte, countering that, with four eyes allotted to the mock-rock, they would each be posted as sentries to peek out from their respective side, thus ensuring they could signal to more efficiently warn one another of any imminent seeker, akin to the beacon system conducted in great altitudinous turrets of yore.

“I forget if the most oldest ones had slides.”

The sparring showed no signs of capitulation from either side.

Within the turret sat Poindexter, delivering another stirring homily before his congregation, underneath the bright blue canopy swamped with ladybugs.

“Mister Snodgrass says, after the bomb drops, the survivors will suffer the ill effects of a contaminated world even once the radiation has subsided from ground zero and wellwater will

be poisoned down to their aquifers and plant life growing green with uranium in all its dread virulence."

"I didn't know plants and water could get cooties."

A pack clumped together by the carousel was unable to agree on whether the sport they were taking part in was "Cowboys N' Injuns" or "Cops N' Robbers," thus resulting in an elegant mix of slogans and cries which proved decidedly anachronistic.

In a vacant spot on the grounds, rope was being jumped. The cord repeatedly brushed against the ground, sending forward the occasional clump of mulch rent from the surface of the phony turf. No leap went untallied by the attending crowd.

"Five... six... seven... eight..."

Jimbo sat alone on the teeter-totter, the better to muse. He thought back not long ago to his imploring Santa to grant him omnipotence, or at the very least to make him taller, and the seeds of doubt which were sowed in the fecund soil of his mind when neither happened. There was also the regrettable ant farm incident wherein an exterminator wanting in tact had been called who kept trying to show the boy various magic tricks with quarters after inspecting each wall, and the cartoonish emmet mascot on the side of the van that had invaded his dreams and chased him down an overcast street with its giant mandibles snipping away like the garden shears his mother used from time to time. Then he remembered too a field trip to the museum where he wandered slightly off from the class to a diorama of enormous insects stalking smaller but still large reptiles, totally frozen amidst a display of lush but vaguely hostile foliage. A lady in a suit who seemed to run the joint walked up to him and talked of vast forests that once covered the lands, a dense graveyard of fallen vegetation smothering the surface, enough oxygen to drown in, great conflagrations the width of every neighborhood block put together with flames as tall as water towers that engulfed the Earth. Then he thought of a hand buzzer he had pulled from a box of cereal recently when he had wanted a blue dinosaur or small robot with eyes that glowed red when a button on its back was depressed.

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In the sky, split by the dinkus of the horizon, sank the evening Sun, all aglow with the dying copper orange of cathode numerals in a Nixie tube. A ray of waning light cut diagonally across the ruddy face of a stop sign which stood vigilantly at the corner of the sidewalk. Most shadows lay almost pasted onto the cement, blooming with a steady pace at the beck and call of the

retreating sunlight. But a handful moved of their own accord, errantly prancing about a game of hopscotch, its pattern outlined in chalk and bathed in the growing shade.

A sparring over the merits of select experiments was taking shape. One stood firmly in the camp of potato batteries, having been forced to discard his own only after returning to his room to discover the purple tendrils of the eyes reaching out in a gnarled mass of want.

"But it sure could light that bulb, kid."

The opposing side took up the cause of bicarb volcanoes, having made one whose full praises had gone unsung at a science fair due to the apparent provincial philistinism of the judges.

"It could erupt. It could flow down and engulf the tiny townsfolk in molten rock. They didn't understand it."

The Battery v. Volcano debate held fast.

Perched on a low brick wall was Poindexter, the fold sitting crisscrossed below.

"Mister Snodgrass says, after the bomb drops, soot will choke out the Sun and the Earth will freeze over and only ash from the grey heavens above will grace the dead surface."

"Will there still be carrots and buttons for a ash-man?"

On the greensward of a freshly-mown lawn, the tin lid of a popcorn can was being tossed back and forth. The gloaming lighted on the ridges of the disc at the zenith of its flight. One participant discussed a 'heebie-jeebies' story recounted by a grown-up who claimed to have seen a spaceman walk into a drugstore, order a malted, then disappear in the parking lot with only a trail of powdery sulfuric dust as proof of the creature's existence. The clerk who swept it up only complained about "always getting the screwballs." The rest of the flying disc party took care to avoid repeats of the incident where they broke Miss Jones' window or the other where they knocked over the toy lab chemistry set and boxes filled with clocks bereft of their radium in Melancholy Bill's treehouse.

The hopscotch entourage watched the game, as a player jumped in descending order through the numbered squares.

"Ten… nine… eight… seven…"

Jimbo looked upward at the dimming sky with an eyepiece. The clouds were streaked with color and the great vacuum lay beyond, its rolling planets and dying stars suspended in an

immemorial void. He had yet to receive an astronomical telescope and did most of his looking with a spyglass monocular gilded in imitation gold.

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The cold rock of the Moon gazed down preemptively and the palette of the sky resembled spilled motor oil. The last light broke upon the vale like waves on a rocky shore, peeling away as the glowing half-sphere perched above the dark sank lower and lower to vanish somewhere in the devouring wasteland emptiness of the horizon, a desert nothingness left in its wake.

"No more pencils, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks..."